Developing an Intuitive, Compassionate Approach to Teaching Family Theory and Policy

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ABSTRACT. Students often find it a challenge to understand the complexity of families in society and the impact of policies on family life. They tend to oversimplify information and let assumptions and biases, rather than theories, lead them when grounding their interpretations and policy solutions. We developed a series of class activities to engage student affect and invite students to theorize about a problem (conditions of The Lakota on Pine Ridge Reservation), intentionally guiding them through increasingly informed, systematic inductive and abductive reasoning that leads to deductive application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. The result is that students achieve more compassionate, complex, and informed understandings of theory, families, and family policy.

Keywords: theory, teaching, family science, family policy, ecological theory, empathy, affective learning

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Background

Decades of research on human decision making and judgment suggest that affect has a strong impact on the way people interpret information, form opinions, and make decisions (Andrade & Ariely, 2009; Ariely, 2008; Ottati & Isbell, 1996). Researchers studying consumer decision making conclude that humans are predictably irrational (Andrade & Ariely, 2009; Ariely, 2008). Classical decision making theories that rely entirely on rational processes have been criticized for not attending to realities of human behavior and for neglecting evidence from neuroscience indicating the importance of emotion in evaluating and making decisions (Lakomski & Evers, 2010). Social scientists have advocated for inclusion of affect in models of decision making, moral reasoning, ethical decision making, consumer behavior, and learning (Andrade & Ariely, 2009; Haidt, 2001; Lakomski & Evers, 2010; Rogerson, Gottlieb, Handelsman, Knapp, & Younggren, 2011; Savic & Kashef, 2013; Van Valkenburg & Holden, 2004). Yet methods for teaching theory often continue to assume rationality and depend heavily on narrow cognitive processes with little acknowledgement of how affective processes impact learning. In this paper, we advocate for intentional integration of affective and cognitive components in teaching family theories in family policy courses.

From our undergraduate courses to our postdoctoral professional development, we authors learned theory according to a deductive approach. First, tenets and assumptions of theories were laid out through readings and lectures. Second, we practiced applying theories to case scenarios or real life examples. From then on, we were expected to meaningfully incorporate theory into everyday professional practice. Given the consistency of this example, we started teaching theory the same way: with a deductive approach to cognitive learning.

The problem with this approach is twofold. First, by focusing entirely on cognitive processes, instructors can ignore powerfully motivating and engaging affective processes that a convergence of seminal research in education, developmental psychology, and cognitive neuroscience acknowledges (Bloom, 1984; Luria, 1973; Rose & Strangman, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Although Bloom's cognitive domain is relied on and valued for developing learning objectives and activities, affect in learning is ignored at best or viewed as "flawed" at worst (Van Valkenburg & Holden, 2004). Neglect of the affective domain in teaching and learning follows a broader cultural trend of trusting the cognitive and positivist scientific approach over what many perceive as "unreliable" affective approaches to interpreting the world (Lakomski & Evers,

Learning in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains (Bloom, 1984) are not separate processes, but rather interactive and relational (Savic & Kashef, 2013; Van Valkenburg & Holden, 2004). Humans are emotional beings; ignoring affective learning does not mean it is not happening but rather that it may be happening in ways that sabotage rather than support learning goals. Teaching students how to reflect on their emotional responses and interpret them explicitly in the context of knowledge (e.g., research and accurate information), cultural assumptions, and personal values is a critical component of teaching theory.

The second problem with the typical approach to teaching theory is that it is solely deductive. The approach begins with teaching the theory and eventually interprets phenomena in a way that is "correct" as long as it is an accurate application of the theory. Although deductive theorizing is important, we use a more iterative, cyclical approach to theorizing outside the classroom that includes inductive, abductive, and deductive approaches.

Deductive theorizing seeks to verify truth or correctness of a claim (Daly, 2007). In the classroom, this often means verifying that the student accurately applied the theory to a scenario. In professional life, this may mean checking to see if the theory adequately fits or explains the situation at hand. Deductive fallacies may result when a general theory is applied to a specific case whose features render the theory not relevant. *Inductive* theorizing builds an explanation of phenomena based on repeated observations, which is something we do very naturally in the world (Daly, 2007). Inductive fallacies lead to interpretations that do not explain the phenomena accurately because the interpretations were based on insufficient observations, or that make assumptions about homogeneity of a sample. For example, "A man in a red shirt stole my phone, so all men wearing red shirts must be thieves." *Scientific induction* requires suspension of preconceived notions or, in some cases, open reflection on how biases may influence theorizing. Fallacies in deductive and inductive theorizing occur in the classroom when we do not explicitly guide students and help them discipline their reasoning.

Abductive theorizing acknowledges that (a) the information at hand is not complete, and (b) available explanations (theories) do not explain the phenomena adequately. This kind of theorizing involves an imaginative process of borrowing from other knowledge sources to generate a list of potential explanations and then choosing the best fit or most plausible explanation (Daly, 2007; Douven, 2011). Abductive reasoning can be thorough and logical, providing us very plausible explanations of the phenomena; it can also be illogical and biased. For example, when we try to understand why a black youth is reticent about planning Black History Month events at a youth center where white youths are predominant, we may abductively theorize about the phenomenon based on (a) stereotypes of "troubled" young black men, (b) biases about single parent homes, and (c) inappropriate extrapolations from white youths with similar responses, and come up with a wholly inaccurate explanation of the youth and his behavior. We want students to make connections among what they learn in our class, in other classes, from personal experiences, and from world events, but we must help them be thoughtful, reflective, and disciplined throughout the abductive process. The approach we describe in this paper deliberately incorporates affective processes and inductive, abductive, and deductive cognitive processes to teach theory effectively in a family policy class.

Course Context

In this senior level undergraduate course, we review selected theories and require students to further develop their abilities to apply theories in the context of family policy. Before taking this course, students have learned about Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory in early child development and family dynamics courses. The family dynamics course is designated for thoroughly teaching tenets of major family theories, but we intentionally review and provide

increasingly complex application of theories in upper level courses to promote deeper learning. The activity this paper describes is part of an approach we take in our family policy course to help students integrate understanding of theory in the context of family policy. We think this approach is important because it provides a framework for understanding policy through a family lens, rather than relying only on the sociological and political frameworks commonly found in policy texts.

The Lakota Case: Exercises in Iterative, Empathic Theorizing

Student Learning Objectives

Our approach includes a series of exercises that provide students opportunities for guided theorizing over several weeks. This begins with emotionally charged confrontation with devastating conditions on the Pine Ridge reservation of South Dakota and continues with increasing development of students' capacity for empathic theorizing. Our approach addresses these learning objectives:

1. Analyze the relationship between families and public policy from a historical perspective.
2. Examine theoretical approaches to studying how government and work policies impact families.
3. Analyze the role of families in creating and solving problems through policy.
4. Summarize the reciprocal influences between culture and policies that affect families.
5. Assess family friendliness in government and work policies.

Project Procedures and Materials

Students know that the purpose of the family policy course is not to teach them specific policies (there are too many to address adequately), but to provide them with background knowledge, critical thinking skills, and tools for identifying, researching, and analyzing how policies impact families for better or for worse. Policy issues that the course highlights represent hundreds of similar issues; the process of learning about them, analyzing them, and making recommendations can transfer to different policy issues that students will encounter in their professional lives. Preceding the "Theoretical Frameworks" module is a module on "Historical Perspectives," which provides 1) historical context on evolution of dominant U.S. values that contribute to political ideologies, 2) emergence of "family policy" in the U.S., and 3) a case study of The Lakota to demonstrate how historical perspectives are critical to understanding current problems and informing potential solutions.

Students are unaware that our examination of the history of policy regarding The Lakota sets the stage for explicitly learning theory in the next module. First, we invite emotional reactions from students in response to the Lakota story (affective learning). Second, we provide students opportunities to theorize in their typical ways, observing how they interpret and explain a novel situation (inductive and/or abductive). Third, we provide increasing guidance on how

students can be more systematic, reflective, aware, and disciplined as they develop their capacities to interpret phenomena and develop working theories (abductive). Finally, in the next module, we formally introduce theories and connect students' evolving theories about The Lakota to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (abductive), inviting them to use ecological theory (deductive) to interpret the phenomena more fully. We bring this conversation full circle to the topic of family policy by talking about how explanation of the problem (informed by theory) influences the types of solutions or policies we would propose to address the problem. All these discussions are part of class participation, in which students get full points for demonstrating engagement and willingness to make transparent their grappling with difficult ideas. This provides an incentive for them to engage fully in oral discussions and written reflections but also frees them to articulate their thinking processes rather than finding a single "right answer."

Step 0: Preparation. Earlier in the course students practiced theorizing about what is "the problem" for various issues relevant to families in society, such as high student debt. We emphasize how inaccurate understanding of "the problem" sabotages our ability to form effective solutions, laying the foundation for systematic examination of social phenomena using theories. We introduce The Lakota exercise as follows:

> We just learned how important historical context is when we examine financing higher education and how much it has changed within one generation. Knowing the context – how tuition, state support, financial aid, and income have changed (or in the case of income, not changed) over the last few decades makes a big difference in how we view "current college students" and how they finance their education. Understanding the situation will likely impact the kinds of policies we create as well. We are going to do something similar with the issue of The Lakota and their relationship with the U.S. government over time.

Step 1: Emotional Engagement for Learning. For this exercise, we use The Lakota story that photographer Aaron Huey tells in a TED talk (Huey, 2010). Before presenting the talk, we let students know that we will view and hear about conditions of human suffering and that we will take time to discuss what we are learning as well as to process our emotional responses. We begin by playing minutes 10:58 to 12:25 of the 15 ½ minute video. This segment shows current conditions of The Lakota on Pine Ridge reservation. The photos are haunting portrayals of extreme poverty, drug use, sickness, resignation, and despair. They are accompanied by startling statistics on the rate for infant mortality, life expectancy, tuberculosis and cervical cancer, high school drop-out, and more. It is powerfully engaging and emotional. After they sit and think about the segment for a minute, students receive the following instructions:

> Reflect on and write a reaction to what you have seen. This may include thoughts and feelings. Although there are no right or wrong answers, your writing should be clear, thoughtful, and honest. (Sorting out your own reaction to information is critical to making good judgments about how we think policy should move forward, and we want to encourage you to develop this practice.)

Once students have completed their written reactions, we move to Step 2.

> **Step 2: Student Theorizing as a Baseline**. We now ask students to consider the information they have just taken in and to begin trying to make sense of it in the following way: Consider the current condition of The Lakota on Pine Ridge. These are the kinds of stats and pictures we usually see of Pine Ridge in news stories. If we ONLY saw this (and did not have historical context), what kinds of conclusions might we draw about The Lakota people and their current condition? This is the construction of "the problem."

We give students time to write responses; next, they may be invited to discuss their ideas in small groups. As a class, we make a list of risk factors that contribute to the suffering of The Lakota, from the students' perspective. This is their first attempt at theorizing to understand the situation and is usually abductive or inductive, but is largely uninformed. Students then brainstorm about what solutions (policies) we would create, based on our current understanding of "the problem."

> **Step 3: Guided Skill Development on Theorizing.** Now we show students the video from the beginning to the end. They see the current conditions of The Lakota within a historical context of injustice and crippling conditions imposed on them by U.S. policy for nearly two centuries. We revisit the problem construction and solutions by instructing:

> Reconsider the problem within the historical context. How might we construct "the problem" now? Write down what you believe is the root of the problem and how it connects to current conditions on Pine Ridge. What policy solutions might we create based on this revised understanding of the problem?

Once students have had time to write down their ideas, we map the phenomena – current conditions, problems, and potential policy solutions -- on the board. This begins to take the shape of the ecological model with elements relevant to individuals (e.g., race, ethnicity, sex), family, community, culture within the dominant culture, tribal and government policies, health conditions, poverty, racism, and the accumulated impact of oppression over time. Students are instructed to save the visuals they create. We finish the historical module on this exercise.

> **Step 4: Explicit Application of Ecological Theory.** The following week starts the module on "Theoretical Frameworks" that includes overview and applications of (a) definition and description of political ideologies, (b) Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, and (c) Theory of Paradox (Bogenschneider, 2014). Once students have examined broader ideological perspectives rooted in various values and their corresponding assumptions, norms, and ideals, we move into locating politics within an ecological framework. Students read a chapter by Bronfenbrenner (1994) and view a lecture on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory with the model of concentric circles to show each of its levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Students are instructed to create a fictitious Lakota individual (e.g., a 17-year-old male) and brief context for that individual (e.g., lives with mom and grandmother, attends school irregularly). Next, students use ecological theory to explain the

fictitious person's ecological system. They are invited to take out their own "theoretical models" from the previous week to use as resources, identifying which conditions, policies, attitudes, cultural features, people, programs, etc. fit into which system. This deductive process forces them to think more deeply about the many players in an individual's life and systematically think through how they interrelate. In the next module on "Disparities" we address these topics: 1) Demographic Trends (e.g., changing family forms, aging population, ethnic composition of U.S.), 2) Disparities (e.g., wealth gaps across race, family forms, gender, and select disparities such as in education, housing, health care), and 3) Policy Implications, such as how policies can contribute to or mitigate effects of unjust disparities. We remind students that we cannot discuss every type of disparity and policy implication. Rather, as instructors, we select representative disparities to help students recognize them and understand how they have an impact on families. In this module, we take time to revisit The Lakota and students again apply Bronfenbrenner's theory to the story of disproportionate removal of Indian children from their families in South Dakota.

Steps 1-4: Inclusion of Affective Learning. Affective learning does not end with the initial TED talk; instead, there is continued revisiting and reinforcement. We use empathy to inform a discussion when we believe it will help students develop compassionate explanations of a phenomenon through a theoretical lens rather than through assumptions and prejudices. For example, a student might argue that people should not use historical context (chronosystem) as an "excuse" for their problems today because such context is "in the past." We might say, "Have you ever felt like you were trying really hard and not succeeding because you had been 'set up to fail'?" We select an example and explore the resulting sense of helplessness and frustration, , eventually bringing it back to "Imagine if your way of life had been made illegal/impossible before you were born and then uninformed people from the outside criticized you for struggling with your identity? How might that feel?" We intentionally balance disciplined, logical reasoning with affective stimuli to engage learners and invite systematic, compassionate theorizing.

Instructor and Student Feedback

Students respond positively to infusion of affective stimuli into theory instruction. On course evaluations, they note that the Huey TED talk, podcast interviews with grand/parents who had children taken away, and similar media are their favorite parts of the course. They also note appreciation for related instructor characteristics of being "passionate" and "caring."

In course evaluations, many students say they expected the class to be boring and irrelevant to their future work but were surprised at how engaged they were in the class. They also stated that they now recognize that individuals and families they work with are influenced by many things outside their immediate contexts, including policy. Even though many students do not plan to work with policies and programming, they achieve better understanding of the importance of families' broader contexts. We believe this result is due largely to our intentional use of cognitive and affective learning to develop ecological understanding of individuals and families.

We can see development of students' inductive, abductive, and deductive theorizing over 8-10 weeks. We can also see how their empathy develops in response to understanding ecological theory and the many things that influence families. When students first see current conditions of people at Pine Ridge and we ask them for reflective responses (affective) and to theorize about the problem and potential solutions (inductive and abductive), we get a lot of sadness, outrage, disbelief, and pity, with mostly microsystem conceptions of the problem and solutions. Students focus on difficulties like alcoholism, lack of motivation, poor role modeling, and high drop-out rates. Solutions tend to remain microsystem-focused and include programs to "help" those families, such as parent training, Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse treatment, and mentoring of youth. Just a handful of students will point to broader issues such as racism and historical aggressions.

Once students have been through increasingly advanced theorizing through inductive, abductive, and deductive processes, their responses change significantly. They still express outrage and sadness, but less at the government for not "helping" and more at systematic oppressions over time that have led to current challenges for The Lakota and other native peoples. In other words, their affect and reasoning has reached past micro, meso, and exosystems into macro and chronosystems. Their policy-related solutions become less simplistic in response to their more developed conceptions of the problem acquired through ecological theory. Students are more likely to suggest restorative actions for past wrongs and to consider that some solutions may lie *within* the community. Before students were guided through thinking of issues in the macrosystem or the history of U.S. and native relations in the chronosystem, they could not see The Lakota as positive players in their own lives. They viewed The Lakota as the problem. Some students continue to focus on the microsystem only as the reason for current problems and on microsystem-focused solutions from the exo- and mesosystems. However, over the semester we see significant shifts in most students' abilities to conceptualize from a broader, ecological framework.

Locating the Approach within Different Contexts

Although the activities described are very specific to this class and to the case study of the Lakota, this approach can be generalized to other classes, family theories, and issues. The key component of this approach is having an emotionally engaging prompt compelling enough to engage students in theorizing. For policy, there are many other issues we could have used, such disproportionate incarceration of people of color as Bryan Stevenson (2012) described in a TED talk. In a family resource management class, we discuss inequitable distribution of natural resources and its impact on families by using a deeply touching, uplifting TED talk on "Greening the Ghetto" (Carter, 2006).

In each case, we are able to isolate a "snapshot" of a situation that is emotionally compelling and motivates students to explain or theorize on the reason for the situation. The instructor leverages the emotional connection as a motivator to understand and actively supports empathic theorizing by asking questions that invite students to put themselves in another person's situation. Once students are engaged in empathic theorizing, the instructor can introduce more information that often challenges their original explanations, which may be based on false

information, assumptions, and biases. Additional information often leads students to look beyond overly simplified, individualistic explanations of a problem to more ecological, systemic explanations. This opens the door to formally introducing a systems or ecological family theory to continue developing more informed, disciplined, and systematic approaches to explaining phenomena (theorizing).

Additional Learning and Ethical Considerations

Several issues are important to consider when including an affective approach to learning – particularly one involving human suffering. One is the potential for a negative mood at the time of receiving information to contribute to avoidance of, or indiscriminate negative judgment of, the general situation – in this case, the Lakota (Ottati & Isbell, 1996). We attend to this concern by 1) explicitly unpacking students' emotional responses to the video, actively supporting students' development of well-informed explanations of the problems and corresponding policy solutions while viewing the video and later in the course, and 2) exposing them to diverse Lakota people who demonstrate strength and resilience. For example, we also listen to interviews of Lakota people who strongly articulate the injustice of the disproportionate removal of children from native homes by child protective services.

The second issue to consider is the ethics of exposing students to images of human suffering. There has been heated debate about the practice of providing "trigger warnings" in higher education with some claiming it is a respectful, sensitive practice intended to protect our most vulnerable students and others claiming it threatens academic freedom and disempowers students (American Association, 2014; Hanlon, 2015; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). We choose to thoughtfully and carefully expose students to some depictions of human suffering for the following reasons. First, it would be impossible to effectively meet learning objectives (e.g. analyze relationships between policies and families over time, examine how policies impact families, consider how culture and policies influence each other) without addressing how past and current policies have contributed to human suffering. Second, our students go on to work in such areas as child protective services, probation and parole, hospice, and low-income youth programs. We attempt to prepare students for these areas with course content that encourages self-reflection, self-care, and help seeking. Exposure to human suffering that is intentionally chosen to meet learning objectives and to be processed thoroughly is important to students' cognitive and affective learning. To minimize harm, we provide warnings that the video will depict human suffering, provide time to reflect on and process the emotional response, support development of informed solutions, and ensure that students have exposure to Lakota individuals who demonstrate hope through strength and resilience.

Conclusion

The typical way of teaching theory – deductive and highly directive – was not proving successful in our policy class because it failed to engage students' affect and worked against rather than with their typical ways of making sense of the world. Given the likelihood of

preexisting assumptions and biases surrounding many policy topics, this teaching method also created student resistance to being "presented" with macro and chronosystem constructions of problems and solutions too early. We believe that allowing students' natural compassion to fuel their learning about explaining the situation (theorizing) has increased engagement and investment in learning. Providing students provocative exposure to real families on Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and allowing students to theorize, discuss, receive more information, reflect, and reexamine their original theories breaks down defensiveness and moves students beyond overly simplistic theorizing. Keeping students emotionally engaged and building on their typical ways of interpreting the world with increasingly complex theorizing has been a more effective method of teaching theory and developing empathy.

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